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ABSTRACT

A study evaluated the use of the request for proposal (RFP) process as a method of distributing federal vocational education and job training funds in Minnesota. Thirty-seven employees of Minnesota technical colleges, community-based organizations, service delivery areas, and state agencies who had actually prepared proposals requesting Job Training Partnership Act funds and 30 employees who had responded to Perkins Act RFPs were surveyed regarding their expectations and opinions of the RFP process. The RFP process was said to provide an opportunity to obtain funds not otherwise available for target populations. A need was expressed for coordinated proposal due dates and consistent proposal formats. Assistance of state agency staff in RFP preparation was considered helpful. The following actions were recommended: (1) simplify and align RFP formats and requirements for all funding; (2) determine the effectiveness of programs funded through the RFP process in achieving their stated objectives and the extent to which programs funded through the RFP lend themselves to replication in other settings; and (3) improve the professional development process for the application and implementation of RFPs. (Appended are the questionnaire and lists of terms and acronyms and project advisory committee members.) (MN)

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ED 372 203

State Council on Vocational Technical Education

STATE OF MINNESOTA

Focus on Process Improvement:

An Evaluation of the Use of the RFP Process in the Distribution of Federal Workforce Education Funds in Minnesota

Perkins-JTPA Evaluation

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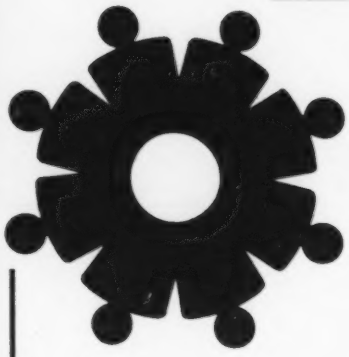

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Focus on Process Improvement: An Evaluation of the Use of the RFP Process in the Distribution of Federal Workforce Education Funds in Minnesota

Perkins-JTPA Evaluation

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Carl D. Perkins Vocational and Applied Technology Education Act and the Job Training Partnership Act (JTPA) provide funding to the states for vocational education and occupational preparation. Part of the funding is distributed within the states by formula and the remainder is distributed through a request for proposal (RFP) process. During the 1989 and 1991 biennial evaluations performed by the State Council on Vocational Technical Education on the Perkins and JTPA delivery systems, a number of issues surfaced regarding the efficiency and fairness of the RFP process for fund distribution. The purpose of this study is to discover what those who issue RFPs and those who submit proposals in response to these RFPs think about the process.

Findings

Chapter One contains the results of surveys that were completed by grant writers from technical colleges, community-based organizations (CBOs), service delivery areas (SDAs) and state agencies. The tables in this chapter indicate that those surveyed respondents have experience with submitting program proposals to numerous funding sources and had a high level of involvement with the proposal writing process.

These are the major findings:

- RFP process provides the opportunity to obtain funds not otherwise available for target populations.
- The amount of effort required to prepare a successful proposal should not exceed the possible benefits.
- There is a need for proposals to have coordinated due dates, and formats that are consistent among groups that distribute funds by RFP.
- The assistance of state agency staff was considered helpful to participants.

Recommendations

Chapter Two contains the research conclusions and Chapter Three contains the recommendations of the State Council on Vocational Technical Education to the State Board of Technical Colleges, the Minnesota Department of Education, the Governor's Job Training Council, the Minnesota Department of Jobs and Training, service delivery areas (SDAs), private industry councils (PICs) and local school boards:

Recommendation One: *Alignment of RFP Formats.* Simplify and align the RFP formats and requirements for all funding sources.

Rationale: Specifically the following areas need attention:

A predictable framework would facilitate writing while still allowing for specific information that needs to be collected to meet the requirements of individual programs and funding services. Making the sections of the RFPs consistent from one program to another would clarify requirements for those who submit and fund proposals.

Compatible data among the various funding programs would save time in preparing proposals. Often granting agencies want data to demonstrate a local need for funding, but they may ask for that data in a variety of different ways. If state agencies could agree on the types and configuration of data useful to them, it would streamline the process for those who prepare proposals. Data requested in the local plan of the technical college might be used as the model for data requests.

Coordinated timelines created at the state level would alleviate conflicts for those who respond to RFPs. A comprehensive RFP calendar for the year would provide for coordinated proposal demands on the schools and community organizations. Survey respondents said that this approach would help them to plan their proposal submission.

Compatible instructions and methods of rating would clarify the grant process for writers. It would also reinforce the importance of certain information and processes.

Explanations of federal requirements would facilitate the submission of program proposals that meet these legislative goals. State agencies have a responsibility to clarify local, state and federal expectations for proposals. Writers need to be clear about the goals of the enabling legislation if they are going to write a successful proposal.

Requirements of the proposal should be aligned with possible benefits. It is important to consider the amount of resources necessary to prepare a successful RFP proposal.

Overall Improvements as a Result of Format Alignment

If the RFP formats are simplified and aligned the process will be improved in the following ways:

1. Less preparation is required on each individual RFP because formats will be familiar and data will be readily available.
2. Conflict over due dates is avoided which enables better planning and execution of proposals.
3. Redundant and irrelevant information is eliminated.
4. Confusion and frustration is decreased.

Recommendation Two: *Program Continuation*. Determine (a) the effectiveness of programs funded through the RFP process in achieving their stated objectives and (b) the capacity to replicate successful programs in other settings.

Rationale: Funding is distributed using the RFP process as an incentive to develop creative education approaches while providing services to target populations. RFP funds, by law, are not designed to meet permanent program needs, no matter how legitimate.

A successful program proposal begins with an innovative idea designed to fund the unique needs of a client group. A thorough evaluation of the program must determine if the program accomplished its goals. Did the program meet the unique needs of the client group? More importantly, could this program serve similar groups in other parts of the state. The laws assume that a successful program will be continued with local funding. Currently, there is no process to determine if successful programs are continued with local funding. In addition, if programs are not continued or evaluated, the knowledge that RFP funding paid to develop is lost. It is important to document what did not work as well as what did.

Recommendation Three: *Professional Development*. Improve the professional development processes for the application and implementation of RFPs.

Rationale: Those who responded to the questionnaires felt that there were improvements that could be made in the RFP process. The improvements suggested could be made easily if on-going professional development were implemented to increase knowledge of and communication about the RFP process. A customer centered review of the RFP processes by those who apply for and implement RFPs could identify areas and methods for improvement. That is, state agency staff who implement RFPs, need to work with those who write proposals to improve the process.

Professional development for those in state agencies would also help to support and enhance the current assistance provided to RFP applicants. Respondents both in the technical colleges and the SDAs reported that the assistance of state level staff was a factor that enhanced the RFP process for them. For example, people said:

> "Good communication with state agency people - positive support [enhances the RFP process]."
>
> "Staff from the state agency have been helpful in the preparation of the proposal."

However, there is no systematic analysis of the assistance to determine precisely how it enhances the RFP process. If granting agencies knew how the assistance enhances the RFP process, they could continue to provide the type of support needed by those in the field.

While improving the quality of assistance by state level staff is important, SDA staff also need professional development activities to develop the knowledge, skills, and processes required to prepare a successful proposal. Bidders' conferences[1] were praised by applicants and could continue to be part of the professional development process for local staff. In addition, SDAs themselves need to provide professional development activities so their staff have the skills needed to write quality proposals.

[1] These conferences are designed to provide applicants with assistance with the preparation of proposals in response to RFPs.

INTRODUCTION

This study evolved out of the biennial evaluations, conducted during 1989 and 1991, on the adequacy, effectiveness, and coordination of the delivery systems funded under the Carl D. Perkins Vocational Education and Applied Technology Act (Perkins Act) and the Job Training Partnership Act (JTPA). A number of issues surfaced during these evaluations regarding the use of the request for proposal (RFP) process to support programs funded under these two acts. The objective of the study is to discover how those who submit and those who fund proposals in response to RFPs view the process.

Perkins Act

The Carl D. Perkins Vocational and Applied Technology Education Act of 1990 states as its purpose ". . . to make the United States more competitive in the world economy by developing more fully the academic and occupational skills of all segments of the population."

The Perkins Act stipulates two major funding procedures for the distribution or allocation of funds; (a) the federal funding formula, and (b) the RFP. The act states that RFPs will be used to fund the following categories of activities:

a. sex equity and single parents programs,

b. criminal offenders programs,

c. consumer and homemaking education programs, and

d. Tech Prep programs.

This study did not survey those preparing proposals who work in criminal offenders programs because the Council is currently engaged in a separate study of correction education in Minnesota.[2]

JTPA

JTPA provides federal training funds for employment and support services to the economically disadvantaged. JTPA, which was enacted in 1982 and amended in 1986 and 1991, replaces the Manpower Development and Training Act of 1962 (MDTA) and the Comprehensive Employment Training Act (CETA). JTPA differs philosophically from earlier legislation in that it places more emphasis on private sector involvement and state-level responsibility.

JTPA funding, like Perkins funding, is also distributed partially by formula and partially by RFP. The JTPA programs funded by RFPs are:

a. Title III—Dislocated Workers

[2] Duane A. Rominger, "The Condition of Correctional Education in Minnesota: A Vision for Learning" (St. Paul: State Council on Vocational Technical Education, 1993).

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b. 8 Percent Title IIA—Education Coordination

c. 3 Percent Title IIA—Training for Older Individuals

Research Methods

In order to evaluate the RFP process, an advisory committee was formed. The committee consisted of individuals who respond to RFPs, state agency managers who administer the RFP process, a research advisor, and Council staff.[3] The committee's role was to advise the Council on the study design, survey instruments, data analysis, findings, and recommendations. Advisory committee members, working as a group, developed survey instruments[4], one to be completed by RFP administrators and the other by those who submit proposals.

Advisory committee members also helped to develop the lists of individuals to be surveyed. Committee members thought it was important to survey those individuals who actually prepared proposals and not individuals who merely sign the forms. Committee members wanted to know about the experience and opinions of those with first-hand knowledge of the RFP process. A list of individuals who were experienced with the Perkins Act RFPs was developed by asking technical college presidents to supply the names of grant writers in their institutions. The JTPA survey list was compiled from the lists of those individuals who had applied for JTPA funding in the last two years regardless of whether they were funded or not. The list was limited to two years because there had been significant changes in the JTPA process to distribute 8 Percent Education Coordination Grants two years ago. Originally the JTPA list was in two parts, those who applied for 8 Percent funding and those who applied for 3 Percent funding, but later the two parts were consolidated into one list. Advisory committee members were able to furnish the names of agency administrators directly as there were so few individuals in this group.

Cover letters, survey instruments and return envelopes were mailed to all individuals identified as actively participating in the RFP process. Non-respondents were contacted by telephone and a second mailing was sent if necessary.

Responses were recorded for each of the survey items as they were returned in the mail. Responses from Perkins, JTPA, and agency respondents were recorded separately. Once all responses were recorded, synthesis statements were developed to represent the categories of responses received for each of the survey items. The responses were then grouped under the appropriate synthesis statements and the percentage of individuals in each group was calculated. Synthesis statements with the highest percentage of responses were ordered first under the survey items.

[3] The roster of advisory committee members is in Appendix C.

[4] The survey instrument is in Appendix B.

The report of the RFP study is arranged in a traditional manner. The Introduction states the purpose for conducting the study and provides a context for the study as well as an explanation of the methodology used. Chapter One presents the findings of the surveys, including synthesis and analysis of responses. Chapter Two contains the conclusions of the analysis and Chapter Three the Council recommendations.

CHAPTER ONE

FINDINGS

The goal of this study is to evaluate the use of the request for proposal (RFP) process as a method for distributing some of the Perkins and JTPA funds. Individuals who submitted proposals during the previous two years were asked about their experiences with the RFP process as were the staff of state agencies who administer the processes. Those surveyed were from technical colleges, community-based organizations (CBOs), service delivery areas (SDAs) and state agencies. They were asked seven questions:

(a) What are your expectations of the RFP process relative to meeting the needs of the people you serve?

(b) How does the RFP process benefit the people you serve?

(c) What are the expected benefits of the RFP process to your organization?

(d) What are the weaknesses of the RFP process relative to your organization?

(e) What factors enhance the RFP process?

(f) What factors detract from the RFP process? and

(g) How would you make any improvements?

Tables 1-3 display information about the individuals submitting proposals, their experience with the proposal writing process and the funding programs to which they have applied. The remainder of this chapter presents a question-by-question analysis of the survey responses. When interpreting the analysis, it is important to keep in mind that each respondent may have given a number of responses to any one question, therefore, the percentages reported under each question will not add up to 100 percent. Rather, the percentages indicate that for all those who responded to a particular question, a certain percentage of respondents mentioned the same issue.

Table 1

Response Rate of Those who Submitted Proposals

	JTPA	Perkins
N	54	37
Response Rate	69% (37 of 54)	81% (30 of 37)

Table 2

Sources to which Respondents have Submitted Proposals

	JTPA	Perkins
a. Perkins II—Sex Equity and Single Parent	3	26
b. Perkins III—Consumer/Homemaking	0	9
c. Perkins III—Tech Prep	3	10
d. Perkins other	8	13
e. JTPA Title III—Dislocated Workers	17	2
f. JTPA 8% Title IIA—Education Coordination	30	9
g. JTPA 3% Title IIA—Training for Older Individuals	20	0
h. Other	1	0

Table 3

Level of Involvement with Proposal Writing Process Reported by Respondents

JTPA

Range of Responses

	Low									High
Scale:	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
Responses:	1	2		1		2	1	3	5	32

Mean = 8.8

Perkins

Range of Responses

	Low									High
Scale:	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
Responses:					1		3	3	5	14

Mean = 8.9

NOTE: Respondents were asked to rate their level of involvement with the proposal writing process on a ten point Likert scale with one being the lowest value and ten being the highest.

Analysis of Responses to Survey Questions

An analysis of the survey questions was done to discover the most common expectations, experiences, and opinions of those who submitted proposals to the funding agencies. Each of the survey questions is followed by several synthesis statements, in bold, of the most common JTPA and Perkins responses. Initially, similar responses to a particular question were categorized. From the categories, synthesis statements were composed that express the essence of the responses in that category. Also in bold are the absolute number and percentage of respondents who generated this response. In order to illustrate the synthesis statements, several direct quotes from the surveys are included. Finally, each section on a particular question ends with a short analysis of the responses.

1. What are your **expectations** of the RFP process relative to meeting the needs of the people you serve?

JTPA Respondents

RFP process provides an additional source of funds for target populations not otherwise funded.

40% (12 of 30)

The focus and purpose of these funds needs to reflect the needs of people who are under-served by other programs, . . .

It will yield funding enabling us to meet the needs of these 'special people'.

The effort required to participate in the RFP process should not exceed its possible benefits.

30% (9 of 30)

The process should be as brief and concise as possible. The Council must remember that education or JTPA respondents are strapped for time and dollars to develop grants.

The RFP process works, however, the funding is often so limited that it involves too much time and effort if the grant is not approved.

An enormous amount of time and energy is spent for small grant amounts such as Sex Equity, I think the written process could be streamlined.

RFPs should be broad and flexible enough to meet varying local needs.

20% (6 of 30)

This should be an opportunity to . . . test a variety of strategies (and possible partners) in meeting those needs.

The focus and purpose of these funds needs to reflect the needs of people who are under-served by other programs, yet give the flexibility to create new and innovative approaches to self-sufficiency.

Perkins Respondents

RFP process provides an additional source of funds for target populations not otherwise funded.

32% (9 of 28)

The RFP process should result in the provision of adequate funds to continue the support services offered in the past to targeted populations.

Provides money for pilot projects.

Without Sex Equity and SP/DH/SPW dollars there would be a gap in our services." (Single Parent, Displaced Homemaker, Single Pregnant Woman)

The effort required to participate in the RFP process should not exceed its possible benefits.

29% (8 of 28)

That the expectations of the funding source (for recordkeeping, accountability, etc.) do not exceed the benefit of the extra resources.

That the timing and RFP requirements are possible given the on-going demands of our positions.

RFPs should be broad and flexible to meet varying local needs.

25% (7 of 28)

That there are options (leeway) within the RFP and that at least one of those options address one or more priorities that we have as a school.

Our community demographics may be unlike other communities (metropolitan area), however, specific needs exist in rural communities too.

Analysis of Responses to Question 1. It is significant that both groups most frequently expressed the expectation that the RFP process would yield funds for target populations not otherwise available. They saw the process as an opportunity. However, a few individuals did caution that if some programs were generally considered a priority, perhaps they should be funded directly, not forced to compete for funds.

Both groups also agreed that the effort the RFP process demands should not exceed the possible benefits of being funded. That is, the responding groups had the expectation that the chance of obtaining funds would be sufficiently high to justify their investment of time and money in the preparation of a proposal.

Finally, both groups expected that the RFP process would be broad and flexible enough to meet varying local needs.

2. How does the RFP process **benefit** the people you serve?

JTPA Respondents

The RFP process provides funding for special services to target populations not available from other sources.

58% (21 of 36)

Funds can be utilized to serve individuals with special needs or multiple barriers to employment.

If funded [JTPA 8 Percent], it's a way to . . . better reach the hard-to-serve.

If funding is approved, the process directly benefits people that we serve. In our case, that means people with learning disabilities, with no income, can access assessment, tutoring, vocational counseling and placement services, otherwise unavailable to them."

The RFP process benefits those we serve only if the proposal is funded.

28% (10 of 36)

The benefit comes in the award, NOT in the process.

I do not think the process benefits the people we serve at all. I believe it's more of a disadvantage having RFPs than straight allocation for good sound programs.

The RFP process provides a benefit by funding innovative programs.

11% (4 of 36)

We are able to try new programs out on a pilot basis.

It allows us to be flexible and creative in finding other ways to serve the welfare client.

Perkins Respondents

The RFP process provides funding for special services to target populations that would not be funded by other sources.

42% (16 of 38)

Gives us the where with-all to provide supportive services and special programs that we could not do with 'regular' funding.

Provides supplemental services or support services not otherwise available.

The RFP process funds go directly to students via special staff and services.

16% (6 of 38)

[Provides for] staff advocacy people who have direct student contact.

Provides specially-chosen staff that possess particular qualities, experience and diversity.

Analysis of Responses to Question 2. Very high percentages of both groups again report that the RFP process is a benefit to the people they serve because it supplies funds not otherwise available. The most interesting finding, however, among responses to question 2, came from the JTPA respondents. Twenty-eight percent (10 out of 36) reported that the RFP was a benefit to those they served only if the proposal was funded. The JTPA respondents were expressing frustration with the risk related to investing time and money in the RFP process. In contrast, only five percent (2 out of 38) of Perkins respondents expressed the same concern regarding the time spent away from students in proposal preparation. It is difficult to know why there were differences between the two groups of respondents. Perhaps the technical-college-based Perkins respondents have more support with proposal preparation and are not in the position of directly taking time away from students.

3. What are the expected **benefits** of the RFP process to your organization?

JTPA

The RFP process provides funding for special services to target populations that would not be funded by other sources.

63% (22 of 35)

Puts more money in pot locally to expand programs or serve clients needing special services.

It gives us a (slim) chance to access new funds.

The RFP process encourages coordination.

31% (11 of 35)

The planning and 'getting together' usually brings out 'holes' in our system.

The process does facilitate coordination among education and training providers and the private sector.

The 'carrot' to link other agencies with similar goals.

The RFP process provides funding for innovation and planning.

29% (10 of 35)

Meaningful program development.

Flexibility to try new service strategies to determine effectiveness.

Perkins Respondents

The RFP process provides funding for innovation and planning.

33% (13 of 40)

Funds for research and development with special populations.

It allows us to come up with new and innovative ideas.

The RFP process provides funding aimed at student recruitment, enrollment, retention and placement.

33% (13 of 40)

Assists in the recruitment/enrollment/retention and placement of students.

Higher number of non-traditional students retained in training

The RFP process provides funding for staff and programs that would not otherwise be available.

28% (11 of 40)

Staffs special services such as equity, diversity, consumer coordinators.

May permit us to maintain staff, programs and resources that would otherwise be cut in times of retrenchment.

Analysis of Responses to Question 3. The JTPA respondents in large numbers again noted that the RFP process provides funding for special services to target populations. They also noted that the process benefitted their organization by encouraging coordination, innovation and planning. Perkins respondents agreed, but not as high a percentage, that their organization benefitted from the process by obtaining funds for target populations. The three most common responses among the Perkins respondents were roughly equal in percentage. It is noteworthy that the percentage of JTPA respondents who saw their primary organizational benefit being funding for target populations was twice as high as the percentage recorded by the Perkins respondents. The reason for this may be that the JTPA respondents are focussed on serving the needs of special populations while technical college respondents serve the full range of people.

4. What are the **weaknesses** of the RFP process relative to your organization?

JTPA Respondent

Preparing a proposal is time consuming.

43% (21 of 49)

The time involved in developing a program and writing a proposal is often wasted if not approved.

A large amount of time, resources and energy can go into establishing partnerships, developing projects and writing a proposal that has only limited chance of funding.

The recipient selection system is a weakness of the RFP process.

16% (8 of 49)

We cover a large rural area - yet the staff who review project applications are primarily urban/metro oriented. Look past the metro area!!!

It [recipient selection] also appears to be too political, meaning objectivity is not always utilized when approval is being granted.

The uncertainty of receiving and maintaining funding is a weakness of the RFP process.

16% (8 of 49)

Many of the grants are only for 1 year which also adds to the uncertainty of whether these dollars will be available to continue the programs.

Also [JTPA 8 Percent] applications are often funded at much less than the requested amount resulting in programs that often do not resemble the original application.

Perkins Respondents

Preparing a proposal is time consuming.

33% (10 of 30)

Proposal development effort and time are expensive and always done on an after-hour basis.

The RFP process consumes far too many staff hours.

The timelines imposed by the system are a weakness.

20% (6 of 30)

Various RFP's due on same date.

RFP due on a Friday rather than a Monday.

Grants could be postmarked by due date.

The lack of flexibility in the RFP requirements is a weakness.

17% (5 of 30)

Sometimes the services needed [by special populations] don't match the RFP's 'quest for numbers.' i.e. maximum age is 21.

Analysis of the Responses to Question 4. The most frequent comment of respondents when asked about the weaknesses of the RFP process was that the process was too time consuming for them. It appeared that the preparation of proposals was not an activity that was expected to be part of their regular work day. That is, those who prepared proposals were expected to find time for this activity by taking time away from other required activities or by doing it on their own time.

5. What factors **enhance** the RFP process?

JTPA Respondents

Clear and concise proposal directions enhance the RFP process.

22% (8 of 37)

The 8% discretionary process this year was exemplary . . . It was very well laid out and included ranking information . . .

Clear, step by step instructions.

RFP [JTPA 8 Percent] was very clearly written and easy to follow; it asked for pertinent information in a concise format.

Coordination and collaboration with other organizations enhances the RFP process.

18% (7 of 37)

Encourages close coordination with technical colleges at many levels.

It allows coordination of effort by many individuals and/or organizations.

It allows for coordination of services (Area Learning Center, Technical College, County programs, etc.).

Assistance from the state agency staff enhances the RFP process.

14% (5 of 37)

Many of the staff involved in the RFP process are very helpful to applicants.

Good communication with state agency people - positive support.

Perkins Respondents

Assistance from the state agency staff enhances the RFP process.

35% (8 of 23)

Staff [at state level] willing to answer questions.

Staff from the state agency have been helpful in the preparation of the plan.

Clear and concise proposal directions enhance the RFP process.

35% (8 of 23)

That there is some regularity in the RFP requirements so that the world does not have to be recreated with each new proposal.

The RFPs improved this year and related information is becoming much clearer.

The simplicity and clarity of the RFP process and procedures.

Analysis of Responses to Question 5. Both groups of respondents indicated that clear and concise directions and forms enhanced the RFP process for them. They mentioned avoiding redundant information that would, no doubt, also decrease the amount of time required to prepare a proposal. Both groups also said that the RFP process was enhanced by the assistance given by state agency staffers. They mentioned specifically the availability of state agency staff and Bidders' Conferences. Bidders' Conferences are workshops held by state agency staff to assist individuals interested in responding to RFPs. JTPA respondents found that coordination and collaboration efforts, that are required for JTPA 8 Percent funding, also enhanced the RFP process.

6. What factors **detract** from the RFP process?

JTPA Respondents

The rating system detracts from the RFP process.

22% (8 of 36)

At times, it seems that personal biases and agendas of the readers can affect the scoring.

Because the readers are outside the local delivery system, they read for other things.

JTPA agendas (PIC staff) are often hidden and biased toward supporting their programs.

Personal agendas of readers/raters allowed to enter review.

Too little time for proposal preparation detracts from the RFP process.

19% (7 of 36)

Short time frames to respond to RFPs.

Arbitrary and difficult to meet short deadlines [Dislocated Workers].

Timing is often a factor [JTPA 8 Percent] . . . with PIC approval required there is often not an adequate amount of lead time for a meaningful review of projects.

A lack of clear and concise directions detracts from the RFP process.

17% (6 of 36)

At times, there is not a clear definitions of what is required for the [JTPA 3 Percent] grant.

Cumbersome application procedures (Economic Dislocated Workers Adjustment Assistance - EDWAA).

State RFPs are too complicated.

Perkins Respondents

A lack of clear concise directions detracts from the RFP process.

31% (9 of 29)

RFPs that are overly complicated and prescriptive. There are probably about 5 major elements to most proposals in terms of describing the why and what in a project.

Vagueness of rules.

Questions...are very repetitious.

Tedious proposal forms.

Too little time for proposal preparation detracts from the RFP process.

24% (7 of 29)

Timeliness - as in not having enough time to be able to plan with staff, the community, and students.

Stringent deadlines for submitting proposals - No deadlines for giving decisions for accepting or rejecting grants!

The rating system detracts from the RFP process.

14% (4 of 29)

Politics or the illusion of . . .in the competitive process.

Analysis of Responses to Question 6. While both groups of respondents reported the same three detractors from the RFP process, there were differences in how respondents ranked them. JTPA respondents reported that they found the rating system for proposals the primary detractor from the RFP process. They expressed concerns about possibly biased or political decisions in proposal funding. This issue has surfaced in other sections of the questionnaire as well, although not in high percentages. The Perkins respondents were concerned most about a lack of clear concise directions detracting from the RFP process, however JTPA respondents were also concerned.

7. What one aspect of the RFP process most needs **improvement**?

JTPA Respondents

Agencies should allow more time for proposal preparation, keeping in mind other RFP due dates.
32% (9 of 28)

Recently the 8% RFP was held up for a long time which made the time frame for replying and being able to attend Bidders Conferences very difficult.

More time - January through March is the busiest time of the year for planners.

State should allow a more generous timeline.

The duration and level of funding needs improvement.
29% (8 of 28)

RFPs should always be for 2 year programs and for a minimum of $50,000 to avoid a 'shot gun' approach to the many issues we face.

Limiting funding to one year.

Longer time period for grant; 2-3 years. Don't make people do it every year.

Perkins Respondents

The proposal format and process needs improvement.
35% (8 of 23)

Simplify the process.

Do not ask for repetitive information.

Standardization of data requirements.

Proposal format and required documentation consistency.

State agencies should coordinate proposal due dates so that respondents have adequate preparation time.
30% (7 of 23)

Better timelines. More up-front preparation time.

Time for completing applications is always short.

Timeframe - person writing grants may have difficulty getting appropriate planning done in time; much less getting things in writing!

Analysis of Responses to Question 7. JTPA respondents stated that the amount of time allowed for proposal preparation and funding were the two aspects of the RFP process that most needed improvement. In addition, while many JTPA and Perkins respondents said they needed more time to complete proposals, they also wanted RFP due dates staggered so they did not have several proposals due at once. JTPA respondents made a number of suggestions in regard to improving the funding aspect of the RFP process. Most of the suggestions involved packaging the money in ways that allow for more money in an award or continued funding of successful programs.

Perkins respondents stated that the format of the proposal process and the amount of time allowed for proposal preparation were the two aspects of the RFP process that most needed improvement. Respondents pleaded for a simple format with clear and logical instructions.

8. How would you [the respondent] make the improvement?

JTPA Respondents

Respondents recommended funding process improvements.

42% (11 of 26)

Allocate funds directly

(3 of 11)

Because the dollars are so limited, I believe that straight allocation is in order.

Directly allocate with requirement that certain target population be served and insist on results rather than totally focusing on numbers served.

Fund programs for longer period of time

(4 of 11)

Give money to programs which are proven successful . . . . It doesn't pay to fund an innovative project for one year (proves success), then it's over for lack of funds

Either only run RFPs every 2 years, or split funds and still only provide 2 year contracts . . .

Making the RFP for 2 years.

Fund at higher levels

(4 of 11)

Fund proposals as written.

Maybe hold more funding back for proposals.

Award a few large grants.

Respondents recommended improvements to the proposal process.

50% (13 of 26)

Provide feedback

(4 of 13)

A comment section in the response on how to improve proposals not selected for funding would be helpful, as well as an indication whether the proposal would be worth resubmitting in the future.

Release information/ proposals from successful bidders and release comments/ scoring of readers. Make the process public.

Require readers to make complete comments. This would not only show whether personal agendas are entering process, but help applying organization to improve proposal for submittal to other sources.

Improve timelines

(3 of 13)

Delays have a negative impact on participant services, reduces time needed to coordinate proposal development and in the long run increases costs.

Start earlier–send the RFPs out in November.

Request a pre-proposal

(2 of 13)

Have an initial one page request and weed-out several agencies. This would reduce the up-front commitment of agencies who have little or no chance of funding.

Perhaps letters of inquiry and invitations for full proposals would alleviate hours of work put into full proposals.

Improve RFP rating process

(2 of 13)

Scoring consistency could be improved by not including readers' highest and lowest scores in individual categories.

Perkins Respondents

Respondents recommended improvements to the proposal process.

50% (9 of 18)

Have the RFP applications shorter and less complicated.

A meeting of all individuals who develop RFP formats to share ideas that work well and an agreement on similar formats for all areas.

Require less narrative.

Have a small ad-hoc committee review the forms and make changes.

Respondents made recommendations to improve the timelines.

28% (5 of 18)

Change the planning calendar.

If RFPs cannot be given earlier, perhaps early draft quidelines could be given.

Have workshop for grant writers - give what, when and why of what is to come for the next year.

Analysis of Responses to Question 8. A large percentage of the JTPA respondents made recommendations about the distribution and level of funding available through the RFP process. It is interesting to note that these respondents did not just ask for more money, but sought ways to increase the level of funding for individual programs by restructuring the distribution process. For example, rather than fund a program at a lower level, only issue the RFP every two years and give the applicants the level of funds they request.

JTPA respondents also had recommendations specifically for the proposal process. They suggested that timelines stay fairly consistent from year-to-year even if state agencies are not certain about funding. They recommended that a process of pre-application screening might save both state agencies and applicants' time and effort.

Perkins respondents primarily made recommendations for the format of the RFP applications. Respondents suggested developing a fairly standard application for all of the RFPs. Also the Perkins respondents expressed some of the same recommendations as the JTPA respondents about timelines for the RFP. They suggested better coordination of the RFPs so that applicants could anticipate when they would need to apply and when successful applications would be funded.

CHAPTER TWO

CONCLUSIONS

This chapter presents the conclusions of the RFP study based on the findings and analysis of surveys completed by those who use the RFP process to obtain funds under Perkins and JTPA legislation. In addition statements are added to clarify the survey responses. One of the assumptions of our study was that the request for proposal process would continue to be used for some funds distribution for target populations; therefore, eliminating the RFP process was not a consideration. The conclusions are as follows:

1. There is a need to improve the coordination of timelines, definition of data requested, and communication about the nature of the RFPs to be let.
   - The RFP timelines are inconsistent from year to year with regard to dates for submission of proposals and for dispersal of funds.
   - Clear and concise proposal directions are helpful.
2. There is a need to improve the evaluation of funded programs with the goal that successful programs will be continued and knowledge about them distributed.
   - The RFP process is designed to fund innovative programs to help target populations.
   - An assumption of both the Perkins Act and JTPA is that programs that work will be continued.
   - Evaluation of funded programs is necessary to determine their effectiveness.
3. There is a need to improve the professional development process relative to RFPs.
   - The effort required to prepare a successful proposal should not exceed the possible benefits.
   - Assistance from state agency staff helps to clarify grant requirements and processes.
   - Preparing a grant proposal is complicated and requires specific skills.

CHAPTER THREE

RECOMMENDATIONS

The State Council on Vocational Technical Education makes the following recommendations to the State Board of Technical Colleges, the Minnesota Department of Education, the Governor's Job Training Council, the Minnesota Department of Jobs and Training, service delivery areas and local school boards:

Recommendation One: Alignment of RFP Formats. Simplify and align the RFP formats and requirements for all funding sources.

Rationale: Specifically the following areas need attention:

A predictable framework would facilitate writing while still allowing for specific information that needs to be collected to meet the requirements of individual programs and funding services. Making the sections of the RFPs consistent from one program to another would clarify requirements for those who submit and fund proposals.

Compatible data among the various funding programs would save time in preparing proposals. Often granting agencies want data to demonstrate a local need for funding, but they may ask for that data in a variety of different ways. If state agencies could agree on the types and configuration of data useful to them, it would streamline the process for those who prepare proposals. Data requested in the local plan of the technical college might be used as the model for data requests.

Coordinated timelines created at the state level would alleviate conflicts for those who respond to RFPs. A comprehensive RFP calendar for the year would provide for coordinated proposal demands on the schools and community organizations. Survey respondents said that this approach would help them to plan their proposal submission.

Compatible instructions and methods of rating would clarify the grant process for writers. It would also reinforce the importance of certain information and processes.

Explanations of federal requirements would facilitate the submission of program proposals that meet these legislative goals. State agencies have a responsibility to clarify local, state and federal expectations for proposals. Writers need to be clear about the goals of the enabling legislation if they are going to write a successful proposal.

Requirements of the proposal should be aligned with possible benefits. It is important to consider the amount of resources necessary to prepare a successful RFP proposal.

Overall Improvements as a Result of Format Alignment

If the RFP formats are simplified and aligned the process will be improved in the following ways:

1. Less preparation is required on each individual RFP because formats will be familiar and data will be readily available.
2. Conflict over due dates is avoided which enables better planning and execution of proposals.
3. Redundant and irrelevant information is eliminated.

4. Confusion and frustration is decreased.

Recommendation Two: Program Continuation. Determine (a) the effectiveness of programs funded through the RFP process in achieving their stated objectives and (b) the capacity to replicate successful programs in other settings.

Rationale: Funding is distributed using the RFP process as an incentive to develop creative education approaches while providing services to target populations. RFP funds, by law, are not designed to meet permanent program needs, no matter how legitimate.

A successful program proposal begins with an innovative idea designed to meet the unique needs of a client group. A thorough evaluation of the program must determine if the program accomplished its goals. Did the program meet the unique needs of the client group? More importantly, could this program serve similar groups in other parts of the state. The laws assumed that a successful program will be continued with local funding. Currently, there is no process to determine if successful programs are continued with local funding. In addition, if programs are not continued or evaluated, the knowledge that RFP funding paid to discover is lost.

Recommendation Three: Professional Development. Improve the professional development processes for the application and implementation of RFPs.

Rationale: Those who responded to the questionnaires felt that there were improvements that could be made in the RFP process. The improvements suggested could be easily made if on-going professional development were implemented to increase knowledge of and communication about the RFP process. A customer centered review of the RFP processes by those who apply for and implement RFPs could identify areas and methods for improvement. That is, state agency staff who implement RFPs, need to work with those who write proposals to improve the process.

Professional development for those in state agencies would also help to support and enhance the current assistance provided to RFP applicants. Respondents both in the technical colleges and the SDAs reported that the assistance of state level staff was a factor that enhanced the RFP process for them. For example, people said:

"Good comunication with state agency people - positive support [enhances the RFP process]."

"Staff from the state agency have been helpful in the preparation of the proposal."

However, there is no systematic analysis of the assistance to determine precisely how it enhances the RFP process. If granting agencies knew how the assistance enhances the RFP process, they would continue to provide the type of support needed by those in the field.

While improving the quality of assistance by state level staff is important, SDA staff also need professional development activities to develop the knowledge, skills, and processes required to prepare a successful proposal. Bidders' conferences[5] were praised by applicants and could continue to be part of the professional development process for local staff. In addition, SDAs themselves need to provide professional development activities so their staff have the skills needed to write quality proposals.

[5] These conferences are designed to provide applicants with assistance with the preparation of proposals in response to RFPs.

APPENDIX A

TERMS AND ACRONYMS

The following is a list of acronyms that were used in this report.

Bidder's Conference - These conferences are designed to provide applicants with assistance in the preparation of proposals in response to RFPs.

EDWAA - Economic Dislocated Workers Adjustment Assistance - EDWAA is the dislocated worker section of JTPA.

JTPA - Job Training Partnership Act - Focuses on job training for the economically disadvantaged, youth, current workers, and older workers.

Perkins Act - Carl D. Perkins Vocational Education Act of 1990.

PIC - Private Industry Council - The governing body of an SDA. This group plans, oversees, monitors, and reviews JTPA programs in coordination with local elected officials.

RFP - Request for Proposal - The announcement of funding available on a competitive basis to those submitting proposals.

SDA - Service Delivery Area - Geographic area within which JTPA programs are administered on a local level. SDAs are governed by PICs.

APPENDIX B

SURVEY

Perkins-JTPA RFP Study

Survey of Organizations Responding to RFPs

Name _____ Telephone _____/_____

Position _____ Organization _____

The State Council on Vocational Technical Education requests your assistance in gathering information for its study of the RFP process used to distribute Perkins and JTPA funds. The Council is particularly interested in refining and improving the RFP process and is dependent upon your responses for the information it needs to develop its recommendations. If you have applied to more than one program, please indicate to which program you are referring in your response.

Please complete and return this questionnaire to the State Council on Vocational Technical Education, 314 McColl Building, 366 Jackson Street, St. Paul, Minnesota 55101 by **Friday 8 May 1992**. A reply envelope is enclosed for your use. Please direct inquires to either Joan Davis Feickert or Leo G. Christenson at 612/296-4202. Your cooperation and assistance in responding to this questionnaire is greatly appreciated. Thank you!

1. Have you used the RFP process to apply for Perkins or JTPA funds within the last three years? (Check one) Yes _____ How many times _____
   No _____

   Why or why not? _____

   _____

   _____

2. To which funding sources have you submitted RFPs?

   ___ a. Perkins II - Sex Equity and Single Parent
   ___ b. Perkins III - Consumer/Homemaking
   ___ c. Perkins III - Tech Prep
   ___ d. Perkins Other _____
   ___ e. JTPA Title III - Dislocated Workers
   ___ f. JTPA 8% Title IIA - Education Coordination
   ___ g. JTPA 3% Title IIA - Training for Older Individuals
   ___ h. Other

PLEASE GO ON TO PAGE 2

3. Indicate your degree of involvement with the grant writing process? (Circle one)

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

Low High

4. What are your **expectations** of the RFP process relative to meeting the needs of the people you serve?

_____

5. How does the RFP process benefit the people you serve?

_____

6. What are the expected benefits of the RFP process to your organization?

_____

7. What are the weaknesses of the RFP process relative to your organization?

_____

8. What factors enhance the RFP process?

_____

9. What factors detract from the RFP process?

_____

10. What one aspect of the RFP process most needs improvement?

_____

11. How would you make the improvement?

_____

12. Comments _____

THANK YOU!

Please return to: State Council on Vocational Technical Education
366 Jackson Street, Suite 314
Saint Paul, Minnesota 55101

APPENDIX C

RFP PROJECT ADVISORY COMMITTEE

Ms. Deena Allen, Associate Vice Chancellor, State Board of Technical Colleges, St. Paul

Dr. Larry Barnhart, President, St. Cloud Technical College, St. Cloud

Dr. James M. Brown, Director, Minnesota Research and Development Center, Department of Vocational and Technical Education, University of Minnesota, Twin Cities Campus

Mr. Leo G. Christenson, Research Analyst, State Council on Vocational Technical Education, St. Paul

Dr. Jeanette R. Daines, Manager, Systems Development Unit, State Board of Technical Colleges, St. Paul

Ms. Joan Davis Feickert, Administrative Fellow, State Council on Vocational Technical Education, St. Paul

Mr. James Korkki, Acting Director JTPA, Minnesota Department of Jobs and Training, St. Paul

Mr. James W. Mecklenburg, Assistant Director, Wright Technical Center, Buffalo

Dr. John W. Mercer, Executive Director, State Council on Vocational Technical Education, St. Paul, and Committee Chair

Mr. Bruce Nauth, Manager, JTPA/Education Coordination, State Board of Technical Colleges, St. Paul

Mr. Thomas Norman, Director, Dakota County Employment and Training Center, Rosemount

Mr. Charles Robinson, Program Specialist, Minnesota Department of Jobs and Training, St. Paul

Ms. Julie Smith, Director, Duluth Private Industry Council, Duluth

Mr. Nicholas L. Waldoch, Service Team Member, Cities of the First Class, Minnesota Department of Education, St. Paul

Mr. Kevin Wilkins, Director, CBS/Dislocated Workers Unit, Minnesota Department of Jobs and Training, St. Paul

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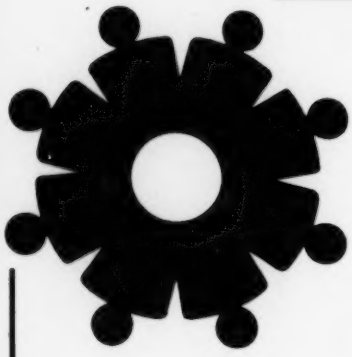

The logo of the State Council on Vocational Technical Education is an abstract representation of the citizen-councilors assembled at a round table. Designed by a commercial art student at Alexandria Technical College, the design was selected in 1982 from 69 entries submitted by vocational students in Minnesota's high schools, secondary cooperative centers, and technical colleges. The Council made its selection on the basis of a recommendation by a panel of representatives from the graphic arts, public relations, and media industries in Minnesota.

Purpose of the Council

The State Council on Vocational Technical Education is designed to further public-private collaboration for the advancement of quality vocational programs responsive to labor market needs. Established in 1969 and designated as a state agency in 1985, the Council comprises 13 members appointed by the Governor. Seven members represent the private sector interests of agriculture, business, industry, and labor. Six of the members represent vocational technical education institutions, career guidance and counseling organizations, special education, and targeted populations.

The Council advises the Governor, the State Board of Technical Colleges, the State Board of Education, the Governor's Job Training Council, the business community, the general public, and the U.S. Secretaries of Education and Labor. The Council advises on development of the annual state vocational plan; provides consultation on the establishment of program evaluation criteria and state technical committees; analyzes the spending distribution and the availability of vocational programs, services, and activities; reports on the extent to which equity to quality programs is provided targeted populations; recommends procedures to enhance public participation in vocational technical education; recommends improvements that emphasize business and labor concerns; evaluates the delivery systems assisted under the Carl D. Perkins Vocational Education Act and the Job Training Partnership Act (JTPA); and advises on policies that the state should pursue to strengthen vocational technical education, as well as initiatives that the private sector could undertake to enhance program modernization.

To enhance effectiveness in gathering information, the Council holds at least one town meeting each year at which the public is encouraged to express its concern about vocational technical education in Minnesota. To enhance its effectiveness in providing information, the Council publishes a quarterly newsletter, an annual directory, and a biennial report. These publications as well as project and activity reports are available to the public.

Information on the date, time, and location of meetings and other activities is available by calling the Council Offices at 612/296-4202.

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